Contemplating the Afterlife of Slavery: Gynecological Resistance, Marronage, and Revolution in Late Eighteenth-Century Saint-Domingue

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ABSTRACT

Évelyne Trouillot's novel The Infamous Rosalie makes it abundantly clear that slavery was deeply ingrained in all aspects of an enslaved person's life. Enslaved expectant mothers in late-eighteenth-century Saint-Domingue contemplated the afterlife of slavery through acts of gynecological resistance such as abortion and infanticide as well as marronage both in the novel and as a historical actuality. These acts of resistance laid the groundwork for the development of a collective liberation mentality among slaves necessary for the emergence of an independent Haiti and the creation of the first Black Republic. Black counter-historical narratives, such as Trouillot's novel, can provide historians with a vantage point from which to understand how historical actors who are often silenced were some of the greatest agents of change and justice in the modern era. Enslaved women should occupy a space in scholarly literature and historical discourse that honors their actions as active agents in search of collective liberation and independence.

Keywords: *Slavery, Enslaved Expectant mothers, Gynecological resistance, Abortion, Infanticide, Marronage, Revolution*

BIO

Stephane recently graduated from the University of Toronto with a Bachelor of Music and a Minor in History. Stephane is currently pursuing his Juris Doctor at Osgoode Hall Law School at York University where he intends to combine his interests in music and law to create a more equitable and just law school environment and legal profession.

Évelyne Trouillot's novel The Infamous Rosalie makes it abundantly clear that slavery was deeply ingrained in all aspects of an enslaved person's life. According to Michaud, a white overseer on the Fayot plantation, as a female slave Arcinte's child was already a slave and punished before birth, forever marked by the whip of the overseer."[1] To avoid this unfortunate fate, enslaved expectant mothers in late eighteenth-century Saint-Domingue performed acts of gynecological resistance with the help of Black midwives.[2] They also escaped the plantations on which they labored in hopes of liberating themselves and their unborn children.[3] The novel only hints at the ways in which enslaved women's decision to kill infants – marked as slaves before birth – or to birth them beyond the confines of Saint Domingue's plantations are informed by the larger historical context. This research contends that enslaved expectant mothers contemplating the afterlife of slavery through acts of abortion, infanticide, and marronage both in the novel and as an historical actuality laid the groundwork for the development of a collective liberation mentality among slaves necessary for the emergence of an independent Haiti and the creation of the first Black Republic.

Confronted with the immutability of slavery and its attendant ubiquity of violence, enslaved expectant mothers' vision of freedom would at first be squashed. Lisette, a Creole house slave and the daughter of an African-born bossale, had inherited the conditions of slavery through the traumatic memory of the experiences of her Grandma Charlotte, her great-aunt Brigitte – the midwife and healer for the Montreuil plantation, her godmother Ma Augustine, and her mother Ayoube, all of whom were aboard the Rosalie during the Middle Passage.[4] The violent and exploitative measures that white planters imposed on her ancestors' bodies to increase crop yield and the number of births only worsened this memory.[5] However, enslaved women forcefully opposed colonial rule and its organizing logic in the decades leading to the Haitian Revolution. Importantly, gynecological resistance and marronage provided them with the avenues to choose their actions – an option so seldom accorded to them.[6] Further, their choice was aimed at securing freedom for their unborn children. Imagining "the resistance of the object," a phrase coined by Fred Moten,[7] occurs at a juncture in the novel where Lisette and Fontilus are dancing with one another. Lisette states, "So often, with a bright, faraway look in his eyes, he would talk to me about a future we had to create."[8] The nightmare of Marie-Pierre

[1] Évelyne Trouillot, The Infamous Rosalie, trans. Marjorie Attignol Salvodon, foreword by Edwidge Danticat (Lincoln: Nebraska Paperback, 2020), 19.
[2] Karol K. Weaver, Medical Revolutionaries: the Enslaved Healers of Eighteenth-Century Saint Domingue (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 6.
[3] Crystal Eddins, "'Rejoice! Your wombs will not beget slaves!' Marronnage as Reproductive Justice in Colonial Haiti," Gender & History 32, no. 3 (2020): 563, https://doi-org.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/10.1111/1468-0424.12497.
[4] Trouillot, The Infamous Rosalie, 119.
[5] Eddins, "'Rejoice! Your wombs will not beget slaves!'," 563-564.
[6] Trouillot, The Infamous Rosalie, 82.
[7] Fred Moten, In the Break (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2003), 14–22, 198–200, quoted in Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," Small Axe 12, no. 2 (2008): 11, muse.jhu.edu/article/241115.
[8] Trouillot, The Infamous Rosalie, 41.

(one of the "ship sisters" from Congo who boarded the Rosalie with Lisette's ancestors) also sets the tone for the urgency with which enslaved expectant mothers would need to create this seemingly unattainable future.

In Marie-Pierre's recounting of her nightmare to Lisette, dogs are giving birth to "brawling pups" in the "darkness of the barracoons." [9]On the plantations of Saint Domingue, enslaved women gave birth to newborns who were already tethered to the institution of slavery. Even though their predetermined condition would subject them to a life of misery and misfortune, enslaved mothers went to great lengths to ensure their children did not become "the prey of these vultures [or white masters]."[10] Elaborating on the dialogue between Lisette and Fontilus, Grandma Charlotte at a later point in the novel dreams of severing the chain of memory whose roots lay in slavery: "Perhaps one day we'll no longer even remember [the word barracoons]; it will have perished with those of us who bore its mark."[11]In spite of the great hardships that Lisette's ancestors endured, and her own experiences of losing nearly everyone she knew and loved to slavery, enslaved expectant mothers' were doubtfully hopeful that their acts of abortion and infanticide on the plantation would bring about the liberation they so desperately yearned for.

Though enslaved women were among the least powerful in slave society, midwives used their privileged position to assist them in inducing abortions![12] In doing so, midwives prevented enslaved women's unborn children from becoming slaves and in turn undermined the institution of slavery. For example, due to her aversion toward birthing children who would be marked as slaves, Gracieuse, Master Fayot's cocotte, had seven abortions, albeit without assistance![13]Historically, midwives possessed knowledge about and used plants, such as the leaves of the avocado tree, that could bring on an abortion, a fact to which Poupée-Desportes, an eighteenth-century French botanist, attests![14]The abortive powers of enslaved women formed the liberating potential that was further realized through their infanticidal might.

In The Infamous Rosalie, enslaved women used infanticide as an imaginative tool to bring about the liberation and independence that they sought. Readers learn that the seventy knots tied around Brigitte's mysterious cord represent the seventy babies that she killed and saved from slavery as a midwife on the Montreuil plantation![15]Similarly, an Arada midwife who lived on the Fleuriau plantation in late eighteenth-century Saint Domingue wore a rope collar with seventy knots representing the number of children she

[9] Trouillot, 88.
[10] Laurent Dubois and John D. Garrigus. "The Haitian Declaration of Independence: January 1, 1804," in Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789-1804: a Brief History with Documents (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 189.
[11] Trouillot, The Infamous Rosalie, 77.
[12] Weaver, Medical Revolutionaries, 41-42.
[13] Trouillot, The Infamous Rosalie, 93, 95.
[14] Weaver, Medical Revolutionaries, 57, 60.
[15] Trouillot, The Infamous Rosalie, 119-120.
[16] Weaver, Medical Revolutionaries, 57.
[17] Weaver, 58.

claimed to have killed.[16] Following these incidents, the emancipatory practice of inserting a needle in a baby's brain through the fontanel at birth soon became a widespread practice in Saint Domingue.[17] As Lisette contemplates the seventy lives "who will not have the chance to see the sun rise," she comes to accept death as preferable to a life in bondage.[18] Literarily and historically, the emancipatory spirit grew beyond sites where enslaved expectant mothers performed resistive acts.

However, French colonial officials adamantly suppressed the imagination of enslaved women and deemed slavery the culminative point of their lives,[19] restricting the scope and significance of gynecological resistance. If planters witnessed midwives assisting enslaved mothers in inducing abortion or committing infanticide, they would be severely whipped. Arguably worse, planters often forced pregnancy among enslaved women using an iron collar.[20] Despite the mechanisms that planters utilized to ensure they were profiting from the reproductive capacities of enslaved women, the latter found ways to circumvent these brutal measures. Even when offered incentives for bearing children, such as exemption from days of work in proportion to the number of children they gave birth to or granting them le libre de droit (complete freedom), they were steadfast in their refusal to offer up potential laborers.[21] By thwarting the cycle of productivity on which slavery depended, enslaved expectant mothers developed an independence of mind that would emerge in more concrete forms during the Haitian Revolution.

Abortion and infanticide represented a kind of freedom only obtainable in death. Lisette, upon realizing that she holds strength in being a slave, ventures on a quest to "reanimate the dead"[22] and in turn to challenge the economic construct upon which slavery rests through marronage – freedom in life. Her training as a maroon begins when Vincent, her lover and a Maroon known as "the Fearless One," thoughtfully utters, "Ants take their time to cross the road, but one day they reach the other side."[23] This parallels Anthony Bogues', Director of the Center for the Study of Slavery & Justice at Brown University, literal and metaphorical notion of "working through to get to another side."[24] Lisette embraces the uncertainty of her journey as a Maroon so that her unborn child may be free. Prior to her departure, she also recognizes how Vincent's and Gracieuse's fates are bound together.[25] Though not immediately apparent to her, readers will understand that in their respective acts of resistance, both agents imagined a world without slavery by unchaining themselves and in Gracieuse's case, her children, from the bonds of servitude.

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[18] Trouillot, The Infamous Rosalie, 122.
[19] Anthony Bogues, ""The Black Jacobins and the Long Haitian Revolution" with Anthony Bogues," UIC Institute for the Humanities, Feb 3, 2015, YouTube video, https://youtu.be/yrjBXPHcNmU.
[20] Weaver, Medical Revolutionaries, 37.
[21] Weaver, 56.
[22] Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 3.
[23] Trouillot, The Infamous Rosalie, 90.
[24] Bogues, ""The Black Jacobins and the Long Haitian Revolution.""
[25] Trouillot, The Infamous Rosalie, 95.

According to Bogues, "revolution is the moment at which the idea of freedom and a new beginning coincide." Agents of gynecological resistance envisioned the possibilities of freedom, but it was the agents of marronage who awakened its embryonic potential. For example, enslaved women fled to autonomous villages away from the plantation to birth free and rebellious children. In communities that thrived outside of the slave economy, the children of enslaved mothers were able to give free reign to their rebellious tendencies and form strong support networks consisting of other enraged and powerful Maroons. Thus, enslaved expectant mothers' marronage propelled the fully formed liberation mentality of Haiti's independence into being by conjuring up an image of the slave as untethered to any external authority through acts of gynecological resistance.

However, in the same way that colonial officials responded with force to suppress abortion and infanticide, marronage did not go without punishment. If an enslaved woman (or any enslaved person for that matter) was seen fleeing the plantation or had already escaped, they would either be returned to their master, tortured by whipping or the use of hot irons, or murdered.[29]Considering the strict enforcement of these brutal punishments and the added burden of being a woman, and in some cases a mother, female runaways made up an alarming 14 percent (1,858) of maroons from 1766-1791 in Saint-Domingue, as documented in Les Affiches Américaines.[30] Furthermore, the child-woman ratio in the Baoruco mountains of Le Maniel, the most successful Maroon settlement in Haiti, was 2:1, suggesting that the free population was growing substantially.[31] Due in large part to enslaved women who became maroons, their children who were raised as free subjects and aware of slavery's horrors became emergent revolutionaries by the time the Haitian Revolution had begun.

Enslaved expectant mothers believed that revolution would put an end to slavery and that their unborn children were essential in achieving this outcome. The collective spirit of liberation engendered by these women would contribute to the rise of notions of Haitian unity, independence, and protection from colonial interference. This is evidenced by artifacts like the Haitian Constitution proclaimed by Jean-Jacques Dessalines, the leader of the Haitian Revolution. Article 2 states that "Slavery is abolished forever" while Article 12 goes a step further and affirms that no white man may ever enter Haitian territory or inherit Haitian property.[32] Through inducing abortion, committing infanticide, and engaging in marronage, enslaved women envisioned a society radically different from their own, mostly to gain freedom for their unborn children. The victory that Haitian revolutionaries

[26] Bogues, ""The Black Jacobins."
[27] Eddins, "'Rejoice! Your wombs will not beget slaves!'," 575.
[28] Eddins, 576.
[29] Eddins, 576.
[30] Eddins, 573.
[31] Eddins, 566.
[32] Laurent Dubois and John D. Garrigus, "The Haitian Constitution: 1805," in Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789-1804: a Brief History with Documents (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 192.

enjoyed in 1804 would not have been possible without a concerted and collective effort at forging a liberation mentality brought about by acts of reproductive resistance performed by enslaved expectant mothers.

In The Infamous Rosalie, Lisette simultaneously surrenders to and challenges her condition as a slave. On the one hand, she is unable to imagine life in the absence of slave society and its many actors.[33] On the other, she expresses a strong underlying desire to be free: "Dwelling within me is my true vision, the one that refuses all servility…so close, so far."[34] After gaining knowledge that she was spared by Brigitte before her seventy-first attempt at infanticide, Lisette decided to forge a new beginning away from the plantation and ensure the freedom of her unborn child. She declares, "Creole child who still lives in me, you will be born free and rebellious, or you will not be born at all."[35] Lisette's bold declaration and the liberating spirit it gives rise to bears a striking resemblance to Dessalines' unwavering statement in "The Haitian Declaration of Independence": "Vow before me to live free and independent and to prefer death to anything that will try to place you back in chains."[36] What started as a doubtful hope of liberation expressed by Grandma Charlotte and enslaved expectant mothers becomes a deliberate undertaking for Lisette at the end of the novel.

Decades before the Haitian Revolution had even begun, Lisette fiercely proclaimed freedom – as uncertain as obtaining it was. Her determination not to let the uncertainty of attaining freedom deter her from doing so animates much of enslaved expectant mothers' efforts to gradually overthrow the institution of slavery through gynecological resistance and marronage. Even though Saidiya Hartman perceives accounts of the history of black-counter historical projects as failures,[37] they can nevertheless provide historians with a vantage point from which to understand how historical actors who are often silenced were some of the greatest agents of change and justice in the modern era. As "the incomplete project of freedom" unfolds,[38] enslaved women should occupy a space in scholarly literature and historical discourse that honors their actions as active agents in search of collective liberation and independence.

33 Trouillot, The Infamous Rosalie, 51.
34 Trouillot, 7.
35 Trouillot, 129.
36 Dubois and Garrigus, "The Haitian Declaration of Independence," 191.
37 Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 13.
38 Hartman, 4.

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